



I'm on my way (I opened my heart) by TheRealSokka

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Summary: Will and Eleven are both still trying to find their way after everything that happened. It happens that they can do it with instead of against each other. But there's still a long way to go to figure that out. (Post Season 2 friendship/sibling piece)

I'm on my way (I opened my heart)

Hope nobody is tired of my Will&El sibling stories yet, cause here's another! It's just my favourite thing to write, I'm sorry.

The title comes from this awesome new song: "*Back to the Start*" by Miracle of Sound.

It's on Yotutube. Do your ears and heart a favour and listen in while you're at it.

:

„Hey, are you nervous, kiddo?"

Jim's voice takes Eleven out of her thoughts. She has been staring out the car window for the past few minutes, watching the forest fly past while the chief drives them to their destination. The trees outside have started turning from colourful red and yellow to a bare brown, and there are specks of white here and there, where last night's snow hasn't fully melted yet. Fall is changing into Winter, and Eleven doesn't know how to feel about that.

Everything is changing fast. Maybe a little too fast. Or maybe the changes happen at normal speed and it's her that's just not used to it, like so many other things. She never really knows. She just knows that right now, she is a little overwhelmed.

"Yes. Little bit."

She can tell Jim is looking at her trying to guess what she's thinking, but he also has to focus on the road. "We talked about this. You want to see the boys more often, right?"

Yes, she does. This at least Eleven is sure about. Her friends are visiting her whenever they can, Mike does almost every day and it's always the best part of the day. But Jim says it will eventually attract attention if they keep sneaking out into the woods with no explanation, and until she starts school, they don't have one yet. So she needs someplace else to stay where no explanations are

necessary. Eleven understands that.

It's just... Staying with Jim was simple. They argue a lot, but he understands her, now. There wasn't such a big threat that she could mess things up while she stayed with him, away from everyone else.

"Look, it's just the Byers. Just Joyce. It'll work out fine."

Jim shifts around in his driver's seat, eyes sternly focused on the road. Eleven thinks he looks nervous, too, although he keeps saying this is nothing to be afraid of. It doesn't help to ease the tense ache in her stomach.

The road ends far too soon, and then they are already turning into the Byers' driveway. El knows this place only by night, with thick shadows and monsters walking across the lawn. Now it's day and the sun is shining and the house looks colourful. Different. Even from her first, unclear impression, she doesn't think there was this much yellow before. She spots a sign by the porch saying '*Warning: Fresh Paint!*' So that's why. A little rush of pride surges through her that she could read that without any trouble.

It's Joyce herself who opens the door for them. She smiles when she sees Eleven and wraps her up in a hug, and a bit of her tension disappears right there. Joyce's hugs mean safety, they always have. Eleven feels a little silly that she is nervous about being around her more often. Next to Jim, Joyce is the one other adult she trusts (*Nancy and Jonathan don't count as adults, right?*). If she had to stay anywhere, she would have picked this place, too.

But in a way that's also a bad thing, because there is a lot to lose here if she messes up.

"Come on in, sweetie. Hopper and I will get your stuff. And Jonathan's made pancakes!"

They spend the morning organizing. Joyce seems excited to show Jane around. She says she's never really had a girl staying here before. And she doesn't seem to find it weird that Eleven follows her through the house while still nibbling at a (good, but not *Eggo-good*) pancake, which only occurs to her afterwards might not be a normal

thing to do. She needs to pay more attention to that now.

And she will, because she really likes this family, and this place. By daylight, the Byers home feels somehow smaller than it did back then, but that's not a bad thing. It feels – warm? And friendly. There's a word for that, but Jane can't think of it; she resolves to ask Jim later. For now, she helps carry her things – most of them clothes, and most of those from Nancy – into her new room. It's Jonathan's old room, her explains while he shows her in. "I'm going to move out in a few weeks, anyway." the older Byers brother says, giving her an encouraging smile. "Until then I can share the other room with Will, it's no problem."

"Thank you." Eleven says, with a mix of grateful-nervous. There's a lot of room here, more than she had at Jim's cabin. And there are books, and CDs, and plastic figures, and... "Is that a radio?"

"Yep. Do you want to play something?"

Eleven catches the encouragement in the question and nods eagerly. Jonathan starts pushing the buttons, and soon a few strange noises come out of the boy. He smiles apologetically: "I hope you like Bon Jovi..."

By the end of the day, Eleven is smiling. There isn't even anything that funny. She just does. Joyce and Jonathan are doing everything do make her feel welcome, and they're succeeding. Jane has been humming '*She's a little runaway*' for the past few hours and nobody seems to mind. They don't have Eggos in the house, but Jonathan has promised to fix that first thing in the morning. Jim has tried to stop him right there, saying that he would never see the end of it once he started doing that. Eleven has punched him and protested, and found an ally in Joyce, who seems to think a lot less of rules than Hopper does. Eleven could get used to this.

That's when her smile falters. Because there's still that nagging thing in the back of her mind, saying this is *too good*. Somehow she will screw this up, she will do something wrong. Or the Shadow will come back and ruin the light. She doesn't want to get used to this *too good* before it disappears again.

They gather for dinner at the kitchen table. Just as Joyce sets down her home-made soup, Jane hears a door open in the house. Maybe it's her imagination, but something in the atmosphere seems to shift as the other three turn to look to the hallway. Then Will appears around the corner. He joins them with a mumbled "Sorry, tired." and sits down across from Jane.

There are glances exchanged around the table, but Jane isn't included. She wonders if it's about her or about the boy across from her. Then it passes and, haltingly, the conversation starts up again. Will's mother heaps an extra-large portion onto his plate.

Eleven watches him carefully. It's the first time she's really seen Will since that night in this very house, and back then the Shadow had been inside him. She thinks his face has more colour now, even though it's difficult to tell; he is looking down at his food all the time. But he does look tired. There are dark circles under his eyes. Eleven knows that sign, she sees it in the mirror every time she uses her powers too much. The one from closing the gate has only just faded. Quickly, she checks Will's nose for a speck of red, but there is nothing.

It is a strange dinner. Joyce and Hopper do most of the talking, but it feels tense, not quite right. Jonathan is trying to talk to Eleven about school, but she can't make much sense of most of what she hears, so her answers are sparse. And Will only responds to when he's asked a question, otherwise he's just as quiet. A few times, Eleven feels a prickling sensation and looks up, but Will is still looking at his plate. She gets a feeling that, had she been a split second faster, she would have caught his eyes on her.

The group breaks up quickly afterwards. Jim has to go back on duty, and Will excuses himself back into his room. He hasn't said a word to her all evening – though she hasn't, either, to be fair. Eleven doesn't know why that makes her feel so weird. Sure, they don't know each other like she knows the rest of the group, but she still felt like after everything that happened there should be – something. She wonders if she did something wrong. Maybe she was expected to start the talking.

"No, you did great." Jim tells her when she brings it up. They're out

on the driveway, away from the others. He sighs: "Will's just... he just needs a little time. The whole ordeal's been tough on him. You just see that you settle in alright." He gives her a quick hug: "I'll be back tomorrow to check, so don't go breaking any rules, kid."

"I never break rules." Eleven says, smiling lightly.

She watches him drive away until the backlights of the cop car are no longer visible, before she heads back inside. She realizes she's already memorized the layout of the house, including escape routes if something uninvited tries to come in. It's a reflex, a bad one from when she was on the run from Papa. Eleven shakes her head, hoping to shake off those thoughts, too. The Portal is closed, Papa is dead, and she is safe here. She has to remember that.

"Have a good night, sweetie. And if you need anything, I'm just one door away, okay?" Joyce tells her when she tugs her into her new bed. It feels like she is too old for tugging in now, but she doesn't protest. Joyce is doing everything she can to make her feel at home, and it's not her fault that Eleven doesn't really know what that is. She silently promises to do her best to learn, though. She owes her that.

The lab visits her at night. Again. By day Eleven can push it away and think of something else, but asleep she keeps finding herself there and she can't stop it. She had hoped that it would finally go away after time, but it never does.

She's alone in her little room, the blank, smooth walls moving in close, far too close. In a way that is worse now than it felt then, now that she knows what open, colourful spaces look like. Eleven instinctively crouches into one of the corners and curls up there. She must have done something bad again. All she can do is wait for it to be over, until that door is opened from the outside.

But something is wrong. More wrong than usual. There's noises outside. Voices. Screaming, Eleven realizes. It is getting cold, and she shivers.

"Why did you never look? Were you afraid of what you might find?"

Papa. He's dead and he's still disappointed in her, still wants her to do better. She doesn't want to listen, but the voice only seems to get more insistent the more she is trying to ignore it. Eleven clamps her hands over her ears, humming a melody to distract herself. She doesn't know what song it is from or how she knows it, but it helps, a little.

And then it stops, suddenly. The voices, the noises, everything. She, too, stops humming. There is something moving outside of her cell, she can hear it, and then a crack appears in the door. It is too small to see through, but a small beam of light shines into her cell, and Eleven watches it warily.

Were you afraid to look?

She's not afraid, Eleven thinks defiantly. Maybe she can get out, this time. If she can just make the opening wider... Her fingers touch the door and trace towards the crack, and then the energy is flowing through her and it widens. And widens, and widens. There is nothing but red on the other side, red light and shadow. This, too, is familiar. The shadows move, slither, wind their way through the gate like smoke and she can't stop them...

"Eleven?!"

With a cry, she jolts awake. It's dark and there's a ceiling above her she doesn't recognize and there's *a hand on her arm*, and her stomach clenches with fear. She lashes out, blindly, energy coiling and *snapping*, and she feels something fall off her bed. She's sitting straight, not daring to breathe. For what feels like an eternity, there's silence. Then a small "Ow." comes from somewhere beneath her.

"Hello?!" she calls into the darkness.

"H-hey." a voice says back. "It's me, it's just me. Will."

"Will?"

She can see his silhouette as he sits up from where she has thrown him. "I'm sorry, I didn't want to scare you. I heard... You had a nightmare."

Eleven shivers, remembering. The lab, the room, the gate. It's still so alive in her mind, real, like it hasn't really left yet. It wouldn't have, she realizes, if he hadn't woken her.

The silhouette shifts and stands up slowly. Will's voice is quiet, shy: "I'm just gonna..."

"No!" Eleven grasps into the dark and finds his shoulder. She can feel him tense up. "Please don't go." she begs him. She can't be alone right now, not when the shadows can come back as soon as she closes her eyes. Her eyes are wet, she's crying, and she's glad it's dark and he can't see.

Will doesn't move for a long moment, then he gives in to her tugging and sits back down next to the bed. Perhaps it is chance that his hand finds hers on the covers, but Eleven holds on to it just the same. "It is still there?" he asks, quietly. It only sounds half like a question.

She nods, even though he can't see. "Yes. Still there." She doesn't have to say what it is; she has a feeling he already knows. The way Will said it, maybe he has nightmares, too. He probably does. For some reason, that thought calms Eleven a little. Just the idea that with him, for once, she doesn't have to explain. "I just want it to go away." she whispers.

"Yeah." Will swallows, audibly struggles with the next words, but they force their way out: "Me too." she hears the quiet admission.

Eleven never talks about her nightmares. It's another thing that's not normal, everything she sees has already happened and it shouldn't happen anymore. And nobody else seems to have them.

But Will does. He does, and he's here, and her heart isn't beating quite so fast anymore. It calms her that she can feel someone else in the darkness, that she doesn't have to be alone. She doesn't want to be alone. "Stay?" she whispers.

His hand squeezes hers. "Yeah." he says, quietly. There's no hesitation this time.

And more words aren't necessary. One word, and it's a promise.

Friends don't lie, Eleven thinks before she cuddles deeper into her pillow. She can hear Will's breathing in the darkness and, a long time later, it is the last thing she consciously notices before falling back into sleep.

It's obvious the next morning at breakfast that neither of them know how to talk about what happened last night. They spend their breakfast in silence. Eleven feels a bit guilty that she has let Will sleep on the carpet all night – another thing she hasn't really thought about at the time. She needs to get better at this. But more than that, she's confused: Will calming her last night feels like something Mike would have done. But with Mike it has never felt this strange. She picks up Will's glance from across the table. What exactly are they now?

At least he isn't avoiding her eyes anymore. At least he was still there next to her bed when she woke up, bathed in sweat, this morning, like he promised. *Friends don't lie*. Maybe they're friends now. Just – friends who aren't used to talking.

"Thank you." she tries after a while.

Will looks up from the drawing he's started to work on in his sketchbook, a picture made solely of blue and black colours. He looks surprised, but Eleven can tell he understands what she's trying to say. "Yeah, uhm – you're welcome."

That's as far as '*talking about it*' goes.

"Did you, well, sleep okay?" Will asks.

"Yes, *I* did." she says, half-accusingly. "Why didn't you sleep in the bed?"

Will flushes deeply. "That's, uh, that – no." he stammers. "Couldn't do that."

Eleven frowns in puzzlement at his reaction. "Why not? There was room."

His cheeks are bright red. "A boy and a girl can't sleep in the same

bed like that, El. Not unless they're, well, together."

By now Eleven has caught on to this different meaning of *'together'* – it's what her and Mike are, apparently. She nods, trying to understand: "So, if Mike sleeps in the same bed, it's okay?"

"Oh...No, probably not, either." Will is rubbing the back of his neck nervously. "His parents might object there. And Hopper would probably kill him."

"For sleeping in the same bed?!" She is getting more confused with every answer. But this is another new set of rules she once again didn't know about, and she needs to learn. "So, boy and girl in one bed is bad?"

"Yes."

"What about boy and boy? Like Dustin and Lucas?"

"Uh, No, that's also bad."

"Girl and girl?"

Will frowns, thinks for a minute, then shrugs his shoulders: "I guess that's okay. For some reason. At least I've never heard people say that it's bad."

Eleven considers this new information. "That's a weird rule." she concludes.

"It is." Will agrees, brow furrowed. Eleven doesn't quite know how to read his expression. "I never thought much about it, I guess."

"Hm." Eleven muses. "What happens if..."

"Morning, you two!" interrupts Joyce, who is just walking into the kitchen. She's already wearing work clothes, but her hair is still chaos. Nevertheless, she looks cheery as she glances between the two of them. "You already had breakfast?"

"Yes, mom."

"Yes, Mrs. Byers."

"You can really just call me Joyce, dear." Joyce ruffles through her hair affectionately. Then she smiles at Will: "You two seem to be getting along."

"Yes, mom. We're good." Will says. Suddenly there's a hint of tiredness in his voice.

Joyce notices, and her cheery air falls just a little. She looks like she wants to say something more, but she doesn't. Instead, her eyes fall on the drawing in front of Will and something uneasy flickers across her face. "What's that, sweetie?" she probes carefully.

"Mirkwood." Will replies shortly.

"But that's..."

"You've got the early shift today, right?"

"Oh. Yes, that's right." Joyce draws back like she's been stung, throwing El a helpless look.

El in turn stares at Will, who keeps staring down at his drawing. Why is he suddenly so – she doesn't know how to describe it. Different. Joyce is just being nice.

"Yes, I have to hurry." Joyce says reluctantly and starts searching for her keys. She presses a quick kiss to both their foreheads, then she hugs Will for good measure. Eleven can see his face over his mother's shoulder, and there's a look there she can't put her finger on. Then Joyce draws back: "You take care today. Jonathan's got to work late, but Hopper will come by later, so you don't have to worry."

"I'm not worrying." Will mutters, but so quietly that only Eleven can hear.

When Joyce is gone, Eleven looks curiously over Will's drawing. Looking at the colours and slithering shapes, she can guess why he didn't want to talk about it. "Upside Down?" she asks.

Will throws her a glance. "Yeah." There's something impatient in the way he says it. Annoyed. Just like that he gets up, taking the picture

with him. Before he disappears into his room he turns around one more time, and Eleven once again can't read his expression: "Mike wanted to come over later. He's looking forward to seeing you."

The door falls shut behind him.

She doesn't see Will at all for the rest of the day, not even when Mike turns up. Eleven feels a little guilty to admit that she kind of forgets he's even there over Mike's presence, who is downright giddy to be here. He can finally see her whenever he wants now, and Eleven's heart swoops at the realization how much that means to him. Mike is smiling the entire time and starts talking about anything and everything that happened since the last time they saw each other. Mostly it's to do with school, and Eleven hangs on to his lips, not wanting to miss a word.

He's a good storyteller. Even for Eleven, who only has Hopper to compare him to, that fact is obvious. Mike puts emotions into every word he says, whether it's happiness or annoyance, and they come alive around them. Jane wants to be able to speak like that, too. Maybe he can teach her.

They talk about the Party and how crazy school is and how nice the Byers are, and suddenly Mike asks "Do you want to go to the Snow Ball with me?"

Jane blinks in surprise. "The Snow Ball?" It sounds vaguely familiar, and after a few seconds she remembers when Mike has mentioned it before.

"Y-yeah." Mike is suddenly looking nervous, twisting and untwisting his fingers on the table top. "I asked you about it, remember? It's this stupid event every school kid goes to and I thought..." He looks at her hopefully: "Would you want to?"

Yes. Yes, she would, she really, really would. But... Eleven's heart sinks. Rules. "I can't. Not if there's people there. No one can know yet."

Mike looks like he wants to protest. So she quickly adds "It's only until I'm in school. Then we can do it."

"That's three more months." Mike huffs, and Jane can tell he's annoyed. "It's just not fair."

She quietly agrees with him. Three months. 90 days. Another long time of waiting, when she wants nothing more than to be a part of everything tomorrow. Eleven hates it. But she also trusts Jim, and he says this is the best thing to do now. Afterwards, there will be no more waiting.

That doesn't mean it's not frustrating. Even though the Byers are nice, the thought of just sitting in here for the next three months, doing nothing, is almost too much to bear. She feels like so much of her life has been stolen already, and just that thought makes her angry all over again.

So maybe, after Mike is gone, she lets a little of it out at Will when she marches into his room.

"Why are you hiding?"

Will flinches visibly. "What?"

"Mike is your friend, too. *You* can go out with him any time you want. Why are you hiding?" Eleven didn't mean for it to come out so obviously envious, nor so bitter, but she's also past caring.

Will huffs and looks up, and it's the first time their eyes really meet. There's something almost angry there, flickering just beneath the surface. But then just as quickly it is gone again and suddenly he is looking guilty. "I'm not hiding. I just – don't feel like talking to anyone."

"That's stupid."

Will looks at her sharply. "Look, do you want to trade places? I'd be happy to if I could. You'd probably have fun with the Party. You'd fit right in."

The thing is that he sounds like he really means it. There's something truly hurt in the way he says it, and Jane suddenly feels bad for yelling at him. Is he worried she is going to replace him? Unbidden, the red-headed girl, Max, jumps into her mind then. How she made

Mike smile. But Jane is not doing the same to Will!

Before she can say so, though, the moment is gone and Will is apologizing, straining to put a smile on his face. "Sorry. I didn't mean... I was a bit of a jerk. Look, there's this comic book I've been reading; you might like it, too. Do you want to have a look?"

Eleven nods hesitantly. "I – yes. If that's okay."

"Sure. Okay." He smiles shyly and turns away to ruffle through his drawers for the book.

Eleven stares at his back. Will is nice to her, even though he doesn't really know her. But he's also always tense, always quiet, like a coil ready to snap. Like he's feeling too many things, but isn't letting any of them out, or, when does, like just now, he quickly pulls them back in again. And Eleven thinks it's hurting him.

But nobody but her seems to notice that, or at least nobody acknowledges it. He is quiet in everything he does, from talking to drawing – he draws a lot – to feeling, and apparently that quietness is normal for him. But there's always this tension. And Eleven wonders when it is going to break.

It breaks two days later.

Mike is at the Byers' house again, even though he shouldn't be. Apparently he got house arrest for something, but his father either didn't know or didn't care enough to refuse him. It hasn't stopped Mike from bringing Eggos and a small board game that he tries to teach Eleven for a few hours. It's called 'chess' and is all about making your figures walk in a specific way so that Mike's figures can't step on them. There's a lot of thinking and waiting involved, and El gets bored relatively quickly. But she doesn't say so, because Mike seems to really enjoy it.

Will sits away from them, pretending to watch TV. Even after so little time, Eleven can tell it is pretending. Will doesn't watch movies alone, for one. Normally he would move around, watching the others on the couch as much as the movie. Now he's alone, and just staring

ahead.

"Hey, is he okay?" Mike whispers to her after a while. His glance over to the couch is full of concern. So he has noticed it, too. No wonder: Eleven has to remind herself that Mike knows his friend a lot longer than she does. "I feel like he's avoiding me."

She doesn't know what to say to that, so she waits for him to continue.

"Has he said anything? Is there..." Mike swallows: "Could there be...?"

Eleven gets what he's trying to say, and shakes her head: "Upside Down still with him? No." She'd know if there was, she's certain. They burned that out of him, it's gone. That's not why he's acting like that.

But maybe it is still with him, though, like the lab is for her. There, but not there. The minute the thought crosses her mind, she knows that she's right. That's what his nightmares must be about.

"I wish he'd talk to me." Mike says. "We always used to talk, before. I can't imagine what all that was like for him, but I want to help. We always help each other."

"He doesn't want help." Jane says, without really thinking about it. It was just the first thing that entered her mind. She frowns. Where did that come from? She can't know that, can she?

It must have been more a reflex than anything. *She* wouldn't want the kind of help Mike is offering. A hand to hold in the darkness? That's okay, she needs that, even. But the help Mike is implying – both with his words and with his concerned looks – means talking about it, solving the problem for his friend. And it's not that easy.

Maybe her and Will are even more similar than she thought.

Slowly, Eleven is starting to understand. That's what that look was when Joyce hugged him. That's why he's sitting on the couch now, ignoring them. Not in spite but *because* of the concern and care in Mike's expression.

Her memories come rushing back. It's been almost two years since the group of boys found Eleven and took her in. El knows now that she wasn't normal then, that there was a part of her that was damaged. But they helped her, and they didn't do it by talking about the damage. What helped was what Mike has given her from the night they found her in the woods; a friend, people to laugh with, a taste of something normal; despite of how not-normal she was.

And that is what Will is missing now.

She tries to put that into words for Mike: "Right now. This is – normal. Home." she says, gesturing at him and at the board between them. "Will and I only want normal. Not... ", she searches for the right word and thinks of Joyce, earlier, "mothering."

Mike blinks at her, surprised and confused. "What? I'm not mothering you!"

"Not me. But Will."

"No! I care, okay; guilty. He's been through a lot and I worry, I think that's understandable, El."

"You don't worry about me like that." Eleven points out.

"But it's – you're different. Will is..."

"I'm what?" Will says, and Mike jumps. He is suddenly standing right next to them. Jane hasn't even seen him move. There's anger in Will's expression, but it's fragile, like it might break into something else any moment. Like so many of his expressions, this one, too, is familiar.

"Will..." Mike starts.

"No, finish that sentence. Will is – what? Different? Fragile? Possessed by a demon and ruined beyond repair?!" Will's lower lip is wobbling. "I know you're thinking it. You all are. Every time you look at me you just... I don't want your fucking *pity*, okay?!"

"I'm not pitying you!" Mike protests, affronted. He's standing up now as well. "Will, you've been through hell, okay, and..."

"And I'm not good company, no, I understand. And now that you've got..." Will cuts himself off abruptly. He breathes out harshly and moves to walk away from them.

Before he can take the second step, Mike grabs his arm, holding him in place. "Stop. Stop for one second and listen. Everything you just said was bullshit." Will opens his mouth in protest, but Mike doesn't let him. There's an urgency to him now: "Will. Do you remember what I said in the shed? You were fighting the Mind Flayer, and I know – I *know* you heard me! I meant everything I said, and you're my friend, so don't act like you're not!"

Eleven doesn't know what Mike is talking about, but she doesn't need to. It's so obvious in the way he says it how much he cares. Eleven can hear it in his voice. Maybe he cares too much sometimes, but that's Mike. Why can't Will see that?

Maybe he can. Will's eyes are shimmering. He looks like he wants to run away, yell, or hug his friend at the same time. "Mike..." His voice is breaking. "You don't have to. It's- it's okay if you don't want me around."

Stay?

Yeah.

"I do." Eleven blurts out, before she can stop herself. She didn't mean to say anything; this is between Will and Mike and she feels like she's intruding all of a sudden.

But Mike points an insisting finger at her: "Exactly, thank you, El. What she said. I miss you, Will. It's been weeks, and you're not really there, and I miss you."

That does it. All of a sudden, the resistance is gone and Will slumps. "Me too." he whispers, almost inaudible.

Mike breathes a sigh of relief. He throws a grateful look at Eleven, and to Will he says, "I promise I'll try not to be smothering. I only care about you, that's all. And, just for the record, I don't think you're fragile."

"Or possessed by a demon?" Will jokes weakly.

Mike wraps him up into a hug, laughing his gentle, friendly laugh: "Get it into your head: it'll take a lot more than that. You're not getting rid of me that easily."

Will huffs loudly: "Easily?!" But he doesn't try to free himself.

Mike pulls away a little to look at him. "And that means you are going to stay right here with us, Will the Wise, until I've completely convinced you. You don't have a choice in the matter."

"I can force you to play with us." Eleven states, only half joking.

Will, still examining his feet, mutters: "Hostage in my own house." And then, to Eleven: "You can't play chess with three people."

"Who says that?"

"The game."

"The game is stupid, then. Rules are stupid. Come on."

"We'll need a new set of rules." Mike thinks out loud, already pondering over the board very seriously.

Will sighs, finally. "I don't feel like playing chess."

"That's fine, too." Mike grabs him by the shoulder. "I wanted to ask you anyway: Do you want to come to the arcade tonight? Dustin has vowed to take Max's Dig Dug crown. It's going to be one hell of a spectacle."

Will's body tenses up almost unnoticeably, though Eleven notices it. But Mike is making such a hopeful face, looking at him expectantly, and what leaves Will's mouth is a quiet "Yeah, why not?"

"Yes!" Mike smiles brightly. His shoulders relax: he was at least as tense as Will, probably.

Eleven feels happy for them. But then she thinks of the two of them going out with everyone else, and that envious little monster in her

chest rears its head once again, screaming '*He didn't even ask me!*'. She tries her best to swallow it back down. It would just ruin the moment. "Have fun." she says instead, cheerfully.

She must not have been as subtle as subtle as she thought, because Mike immediately looks guilty. "Damnit. Sorry, El, I didn't think..."

"Jim says I can't be seen until he 'sorts it out'." she interrupts before this can make her feel even worse. "There's nothing I could do except stand outside and watch you, anyway."

Suddenly, Will's eyes find hers, without warning. Eleven startles at the sudden resolve shining in them. Then a hopeful smile lifts the corners of his mouth, which was about the last reaction she was expecting. He and Mike exchange a look, and suddenly Mike is smiling, too, and she is completely lost what's going on. Will turns back to her:

"Actually, there is."

The arcade building on the far side of the parking lot is bright lights, muffled yelling and metallic smells. Mike and the others have already told her stories about this place, but El doesn't feel that has prepared her at all. Whatever she expected, this is more. More colours, more noise and more promise. And she's not even inside yet.

"You ready to have fun?" Lucas asks from beside her. He is grinning like he just won every game in there already.

"Not sure." El answers honestly. *Friends don't lie*. She straightens up. "But I want to."

"Follow me." he says.

The others are all already inside. Sneaking behind the parked cars, Lucas leads El to the back of the building, where the blinking lights are only just visible. It's dark back here, so the chances of anyone seeing them are low.

There's a small window about two meters off the ground, with a faint light flickering through. Lucas points up at it: "That's our way in."

There's a latch on the other side. Can you open it?"

El closes her eyes, finds the metal resistance and pushes. There's a barely audible little click.

A grinning Lucas gives her an impressed thumbs up. "Nice. Come on, I'll boost you up."

The room El slips into is only lit by the glow coming from underneath the door to the next room. Right on the other side, El can hear the clamour of the other children at the game consoles. A rush of exhilaration goes through her that she's so close to being discovered, that she's doing something forbidden. There's probably a lot of Hopper rules she is breaking right now.

Then the door is opened from the other side and the familiar, curly haired figure of Dustin jumps inside. He closes the door quickly, then he sends El a triumphant (toothy) grin: "Here we are. Operation Obi-Wan is a success."

"Operation what?"

"Ignore him." Lucas gasps out. He's pulling himself up through the window behind them, breathing heavily. "Dustin gives everything code names."

"You could have just come in the normal way, man." Dustin states.

His friend has managed to squeeze through and lands on the floor, careful not to tread on anything. "Could have." he agrees nonchalantly.

"Show-off." Dustin complains. In that moment the door opens again and Mike slips inside, closely followed by Max. They're arguing before the door even closes fully: "You were supposed to wait until I'm in and then follow, damnit!" Mike complains.

"Relax, Wheeler. That Keith guy wouldn't notice a pink elephant sneaking in here. We're good."

Mike concedes with a huff and spots El. His frown turns into a grin: "Welcome to the arcade."

It's not the real arcade, sure, but El isn't complaining. This room is where the out of order gaming machines are kept, they explain to her, and Dustin knows a few tricks how to get them working again, more or less. Mostly those tricks involve hitting the machines in one way or another, but, again, El won't question it. Because after the first round of 'Pacman' she is far too absorbed to care about anything else. Keeping a small yellow ball alive is more challenging than it first sounded. The ghosts catch her a lot, and it's extremely frustrating, but also fun, somehow. It's weird.

At some point, Will slips in from the main room and switches places with Lucas. They're taking turns distracting the guy who's supposed to keep watch. So far, the plan is working, because no one has barged in here yet. And El is loving this. Granted, with her and all her friends crammed into this small space, it's a little hard to move, but the muffled laughter, groans, curses and secret smiles, plus the knowledge that they shouldn't be doing this, make it all worth it.

Her only frustration is that even with all her powers she can't seem to will those stupid little ghosts out of existence, even after they've caught her for the hundredth time.

It's pitch black by the time their group walks back across the tarmac of the arcade's parking lot. El can't stop smiling. Mike is holding her hand. Dustin and Lucas are arguing who got the highest score, and Will is laughing at something Max was saying. It feels good. There is a lightness to it all that El hasn't even known she was missing, and she is just smiling quietly and breathing it in.

And, once they've split up into their respective groups, she leans in and presses a quick kiss to Mike's cheek, and then one to Will's, as well.

"Hey!" El can't say for certain in the dark, but it sounds like they're both blushing. "What was that?"

"That was thanks."

Will laughs softly. "El, there's another rule for *kissing* boys who aren't your boyfriend..."

"Don't care." El proclaims. And that settles that.

Over the next few days, there are a lot of sleepovers at the Byers house, and El gets formally integrated into the Party – together with Max. The redhead, by unspoken agreement, joined the arcade expedition, and since then she always seems to be there, no matter what they do. El doesn't have as big a problem with that as she expected to.

Mike shows her how card games work and Dustin and Lucas try to explain their favourite game, *Dungeons and Dragons*, but that leaves El more confused than anything. She'll have to ask Will later, she thinks while the two boys go on and on, by now more arguing with each other than explaining. El looks across the table, and Max is already looking at her. The other girl nods at the boys and rolls her eyes, and El grins. She doesn't really know what to make of Max yet, but maybe she doesn't have to hate her.

In the corner of her eye, she notices Will noticing her looking at the redhead. He smiles quietly and turns back to his sketch book.

Will is quiet in everything he does. And, as El learns, that that is true even for his night terrors.

She wakes up one night, throat dry as paper, and walks out to get some water. The house is dead silent at this time, of course. There's no sound coming from Will's room when she gets back, and she doesn't know what it is that prompts her to stop. Maybe it's just a feeling. But something is wrong. She pushes open the door carefully, quietly, and slips inside.

Will is asleep, but his breathing is not even as she's come to know it. His brow is covered in sweat and his lips pressed together as if to stop from screaming. El hovers near the bed, unsure what to do. Joyce would hug Will and tell him it's alright, she knows, but that's exactly what the argument was about. In the end, El lies down next to his bed and takes her friend's hand in her own. Will doesn't wake up, but his fingers close around hers instinctively, and El draws confidence from that. Maybe she can help, too.

Her back is aching when she wakes up the next morning, and for a moment she once again doesn't know where she is. This is not her room. She sits up, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes, and finds Will already looking at her, looking as surprised as she is to find her there.

"El?"

"Hi." she answers,

"Were you here all night?"

"Yes."

"Oh. But you slept on the floor."

"So did you. Often."

A little smile lifts the corners of his mouth: "Okay. Touché, I guess."

El frowns: "*Touche*?"

"It means you got me." Will explains. There's something soft in his expression, and it says he knows why she was in his room. "Thanks."

"No problem."

"No, not just for this, but..." Will shrugs and gives an embarrassed laugh. "Everything, I guess. I – kind of feel safer with you around. You're so - confident. And you're a mage."

He feels safer when she's around. Eleven almost laughs out loud at that statement, but Will didn't mean it as a joke. He actually means that. He probably didn't how much that means, but that doesn't mean there's not suddenly a lump forming in her throat.

"Hey, did I say something wrong?"

She meets Wills suddenly concerned look, sniffs and swallows the emotions back down. "No." Then she says the next best thing that comes to mind: "We should have sleeping bags."

There's a second where Will just looks at her in surprise, then he

giggles suddenly. "Yeah. I guess we should."

El's stomach rumbles, and she is grateful for the distraction. "And breakfast." she adds.

"And breakfast." Will confirms.

The Snow Balls comes, and El dances with Mike, and it is perfect, and it is over far too soon. Jim, without explanation, allowed her to go all of a sudden, and she thinks she has to really thank him for this. Once she can get the stupid smile off her face.

Mike kissed her.

And she kissed him.

She's pretty sure she saw Max kiss Lucas, too. There was a lot of kissing.

It was the best day of her life.

And El doesn't even feel like it has really ended yet. In the absence of school and his older brother, Will has kidnapped Jonathan's radio and the entire morning there has been music. Some new band Will has taken a liking to. He is laying on the bed, flipping through his brother's photographs, laughing occasionally at some of the more stupid looking faces. El feels a smile steal onto her face. She can't believe how much has changed in these few short weeks.

"Saw you dancing with a girl. Pretty." she comments idly.

Will nods, distractedly. "Yeah. Her name's Katie. She is nice." He doesn't divulge any more, and El leaves it at that. She is still floating with the feeling of the dance, arm in arm with Mike. Plus, '*Down Under*' has a really good beat, and she enjoys just getting lost in it all.

So much so that she doesn't even realize she's swaying in place until Will's dry comment: "Looks like you had fun, too."

Instead of an answer, El gives up completely and fully breaks into dance. She reaches out to Will invitingly. The music's good and she

feels dancy, so she's gonna goddamn dance, and since Will's only been laying on the bed all day, he gets to join her. No butts. Will sceptically raises both eyebrows, but she knows he loves this song and in the end he does step on to the 'dance floor'.

They end up dancing more against than with each other, with Will doing moves El is pretty sure would never work with a partner and her just doing whatever as long as it feels right to the music. She believes this is called 'freestyle'. It's fun.

Near the end of the song, Will spontaneously abandons whatever he was doing and actually tries to spin her around, like El had seen other couples do at the Snow Ball. She's not sure whose fault it is – they're both about equally bad at this – but somehow she stumbles against the bed mid-pirouette and the next thing she knows she's laying on the carpet, mouth open in surprise, and Will is slowly sinking down to her level, shaking with quiet laughter. That makes El break into giggles, too, which only makes him laugh even harder.

It's like they fuel each other's silliness. Finally, she gasps out a "Stop!" and flings a pillow at him to *make* him stop, cause she really needs to start breathing again.

That's when there's a knock on the door and Hopper peeks into Will's room. He takes one look at both of them on the carpet, frowns and asks, "Am I interrupting something?"

"N – *whew* – no." El replies.

"Just listening to some music, chief." Will jumps in, having caught his breath slightly faster. He helpfully points to the radio, which has started up a new song, and adds, "Men at Work."

"Hm." Jim looks sceptically between El, Will and the radio. Finally, he gives a shrug: "Well, I am not a man at work, at the moment. Can I borrow you for a second, kiddo?" That is addressed to El.

"Sure." El untangle herself from the carpet and follows the chief out into the living room, scanning his back curiously. There's something different about him, somehow, she could pick up on that even without her powers. Plus, it's noon on a Saturday. *Shouldn't* he be

working right now?

Jim sits them both down on the couch, so that they're facing each other. El braces for a serious conversation, because that is what this feels like. She notices a white envelope lying on the table next to them, looking official, and that doesn't help.

Jim starts haltingly: "So, Jane - I talked with Dr. Owens today and..." The words seem to leave him all of a sudden and he just gestures to the envelope on the table: "That."

Now completely brimming with curiosity, El snatches up the envelope. It's already opened, and there is just one piece of paper inside. She carefully takes it out, scanning the top. After a second, the letters start to form meaningful words: *State of Indiana / Certificate of Birth*. She frowns and reads on.

The next two words are printed in bold, and everything in El stops as she reads them. Just to be sure she didn't imagine it, she reads them again. And again.

Jane Hopper.

Jane Hopper.

El knows what this means. What she doesn't understand is how. She looks up at Jim, wide eyed: "I am your..."

"Only if you want to!" he quickly clarifies. "I mean, you needed a real name and it would make things easier."

"...daughter?"

Jim breathes out deeply. "Yes. If you want to. I think – damnit, might as well say it now: That's already what you are to me."

Suddenly his form is getting blurry. El sniffs, looks at him, and then her field of vision is abruptly narrowed to just a square of blue uniform when she throws her arms around his neck. Jim hugs her back, stronger than he ever has. Her tears prickle in her eyes, and she doesn't even know why; this is not sad, it's happy. Jim pats her back lightly. "There, there, kiddo."

She sniffs out a "Thank you." and it's not saying half of what she wants to say, but she doesn't have the words to say it better, so she just repeats, "Thank you."

When they finally disentangle themselves, Jim is looking happier than El has ever seen him. It's a good look on him, and El thinks he should show it more often. "Can I still call you Jim?" she wants to know. 'Dad' feels weird in her mouth. It's too close to 'papa'.

He nods. "Sure, kid. Whatever you like. But when the boys are around, you call me chief, understood?"

El catches the joking tone. "What, because they won't respect you otherwise?" she teases.

"They'd better." Jim huffs. "Especially Mike. I'm watching him closely. Don't think I haven't caught on to you two."

El blushes fiercely. That *something* she has with Mike is still too new and too raw to talk about it like that. "Don't interrogate him!" she warns.

"Just kidding. Mostly."

Minutes after he is gone, El is still sitting on the couch, looking at the certificate. Retracing the same letters again and again.

Jane Hopper.

Jane Hopper.

So she really is Jane now. That is kind of a strange feeling. El looks down at herself, just to make sure she's still the same person. Jane. Not Eleven, not El; *Jane*. She supposes it makes sense: it's what her mother named her, so it's who she is meant to be. Eleven and El must have been just episodes on the way to re-discovering herself.

"El? I was starting to worry. Come on, what's all the secrecy about?" Will sits down on the couch next to her. "Hey. Are you okay?"

Wordlessly, Jane hands him the sheet of paper. Will takes it with a look of confusion, brow furrowed. She knows exactly when he

understands, because his face falls and his eyes widen, probably like a mirror of her own, earlier. Will gapes at her: "Oh. You... oh."

El nods. She makes a motion to indicate all of herself: "Jane Hopper."

Her friend catches himself. "That's – wow, El, that's great! I mean, uh, Jane. So Hopper did adopt you. Mom thought he might."

El turns on him at light speed: "You *knew*?!"

"I didn't *know*!" Will raises his hands in surrender. "It was just a – hey, stop it! El! Drop that pillow!"

The first crocuses are breaking through the snow and school is only a week away when Jane wakes up one morning to find Will sitting on her bed. There has been no nightmare, he's just there. Jane hasn't had a nightmare in days.

"What's up?" she says sleepily.

Will scratches his neck. There is an almost unnoticeable flush on his face. "I wanted to show you something. I made it for our start to high school, but you can see it now, if you want."

"That's mysterious." New word, four syllables and fitting her perfectly, according to Mike. Jane loves it. With a flick of the head, she makes the covers fly off the bed and jumps out.

She follows Will into his room, where he immediately opens his drawer. He takes out several sheets of paper, and though Jane can only see the backs, she knows they're drawings. Will has that shy-proud aura around him that only appears when he's showing her one of those. Jane doesn't know much about art by any stretch, but she can tell that Will is really good at it. He's tried to teach her to do it, too, but her attempts looked awful in comparison and to her it doesn't really seem fun to do by herself.

Will is about to turn around, but then he stops himself at the last second. "You can't tell the others yet, okay? It's supposed to be a surprise."

Jane motions to zip her mouth shut.

"Okay." Her friend, now more on the nervous side, turns the first page. "What do you think?"

It's Lucas. Well, it's his head, with a headband and a thoughtful expression in the corners of his mouth. The picture is almost life-like, and if El had to draw Lucas from memory (and if she could draw) this is what she would picture. He is looking off somewhere into the distance, like he's searching for something.

Just from one look, El can tell that Will has been working on this a while: the face is almost life-like, the lines clean, with no stutters or eraser smudges. And the entire picture is drawn in red; a subtle, almost orange red.

She's aware of Will watching her nervously, waiting for her opinion. Like he seriously cares what she thinks, even though it's obvious that this is amazing. El smiles, more at him than at the picture. "Cool." she says. "Bitchin cool."

Will's mouth lifts in a hesitant smile. "Really?"

"Really. Cool. But why is he red?"

Will blushes once again. "I – well, I wanted to bring out something different in everyone. So I thought, colours. And Lucas – I don't know, red just seemed to fit."

"It does." El confirms. It really does, even though she couldn't explain why. Then she frowns. "Wait; 'everyone'?"

Will grins, and it's the most happy and – carefree, that's the word – she has ever seen him. "Yeah."

One by one, he unveils the rest of the Party. Next is Dustin, all in yellow, wearing a big, toothless grin. It's not really accurate anymore now that all his teeth have come in, but Will threatens to hit her with his sketch book when she suggests he correct it ("*You have no idea how long that smile took!*"), so El doesn't dwell on that inaccuracy.

She gasps when she sees Mike, all in blue. He's *really* pretty. She

knew that, of course, but it really jumps out at her now. The look on his face is the one from the Snow Ball, right before their dance, and El wonders how Will could have seen that look so clearly, because it's perfect. She might be clutching it to her chest, like the girl in that stupid romance movie.

Her own picture is done in purple. El inspects it critically. Her eyes are framed with black eyeliner, her hair curly and standing up in places, as if from electricity. Sparks are flying from her fingers. Her gaze is focused directly in front, staring out of the picture and right back at El.

She is looking stern. Scary. Is that really how she looks like?

Will nudges her and points at the corners of picture-El's mouth. They're tilted up ever so slightly, in a small hint of a smile. She hadn't seen that the first time. It doesn't stop El from nudging Will back harder: "I look like I'm trying to kill somebody!"

"Hey, I made you smile!"

"Barely."

"Life-like."

El really tries to keep frowning at him, but it devolves into a chuckle. With a shake of her head, she turns the last page: An unfinished picture of Max. She's the only one whose face isn't visible; her head is thrown back in a laugh. Her hair is fanning behind her, almost spilling off the page.

Of course, it's in orange.

"I'll try to do mom and Hopper next." Will says. What makes El turn towards him is that he says it almost teasingly. "Maybe even in the same picture..."

El inclines her head thoughtfully. She'd like a picture like that. "You think that would work?"

Will shrugs, embarrassed: "I'm not the best judge what can work and what can't."

No, but that' okay because neither is she, El thinks. Case in point: the two of them, right now. She slings an arm around Will's shoulders: "It's worked out pretty well so far."

He grins back: "Yeah. That's true."